



the best way to attach covers to a coptic binding - by Kaija Rantakari / paperiaarre.com

THE BEST WAY TO ATTACH COVERS TO A COPTIC BINDING

August 4, 2016

You know me, pretty determined about finding and using the best practices for all sorts of things... This week I'm writing about a little detail regarding attaching covers to a Coptic bound book - the hidden diagonal stitch (for the lack of a better term). Have you noticed how the sewing thread in my Coptic bound books enters the covers at the edge of the cover board? It may seem like a very minor thing, but it's actually something quite relevant to the durability and stability of the finished book.

Most modern Coptic bound books I see around the Internet have their covers attached by simply wrapping the sewing thread around the board edge. (For obvious reasons I'm not sharing photos of any particular

Welcome to Paperiaarre!



Hello, my name is Kaija. I'm a master bookbinder / mixed media artist / accumulator extraordinaire / poet from Finland. This website is where I share my creations to fellow paper enthusiasts.

Paperiaarre is Finnish for a paper treasure, and I hope you find many of those here!



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goes through perhaps the most wear - at the outer edge of the spine, which is the widest point of the book thickness-wise, and most likely to stick to things when you're stuffing that notebook in your bag. Sooner or later that thread will begin to break down, and little by little the covers begin to loosen. If you want a great Coptic bound notebook that lasts longer, make sure its covers are attached at the edge of the board, not over the edge!



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Anchoring the covers in place with the thread travelling diagonally through the cover board protects the thread from needless wear and tear, and also diminishes the movement of the covers in relation to the pages a great deal. That's also one thing that helps to protect the thread from breaking from wear. Using this diagonal stitch does require some thickness to the cover boards for it to work. Depending on your thread thickness, you can probably get away with using 2mm board. I prefer 3mm minimum, but that's just me and my aesthetics.

I shared this little video on [Instagram](#) showing how I create that diagonal channel for the thread to travel from the spine edge of the board to the first hole going directly through the cover board.

| [Video published by Kaija Rantakari \(@paperiaarre\)](#) Aug 3rd 2016 at 8.24 PDT

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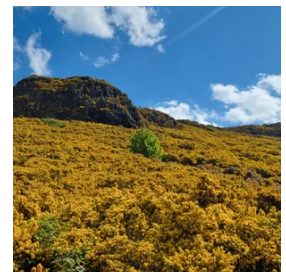
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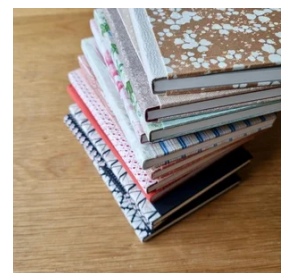
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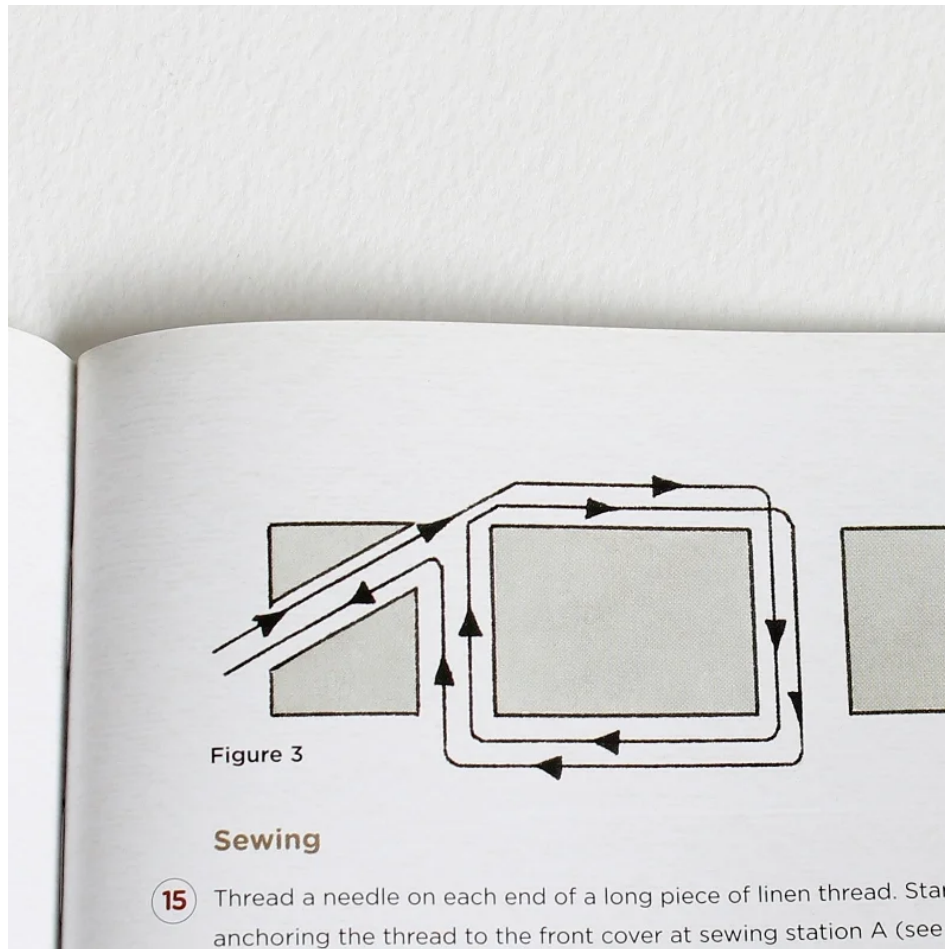
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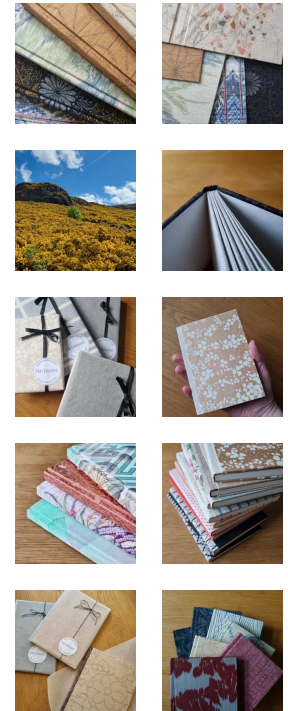


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And here's a peek of the double needle Coptic binding tutorial I made for *Making Mini Books by Kathleen McCafferty* (Lark Crafts, 2011). This illustration should explain much clearer the path for the sewing thread in the covers than my words ever could. I definitely recommend getting acquainted with the book – it has plenty of great mini book tutorials! And they're all made using techniques that are easy to adapt to larger scale notebooks, too.

Remember the tip I shared **about creating neat holes**? These holes were drilled using Dremel, and while that's neater than using an awl (also easier on my wrists), some tidying up is still required before covering. Creating those diagonal holes is less bumpy, so that's the one hole I always make after the covers are all done and ready to be sewn in place.

INSTAGRAM

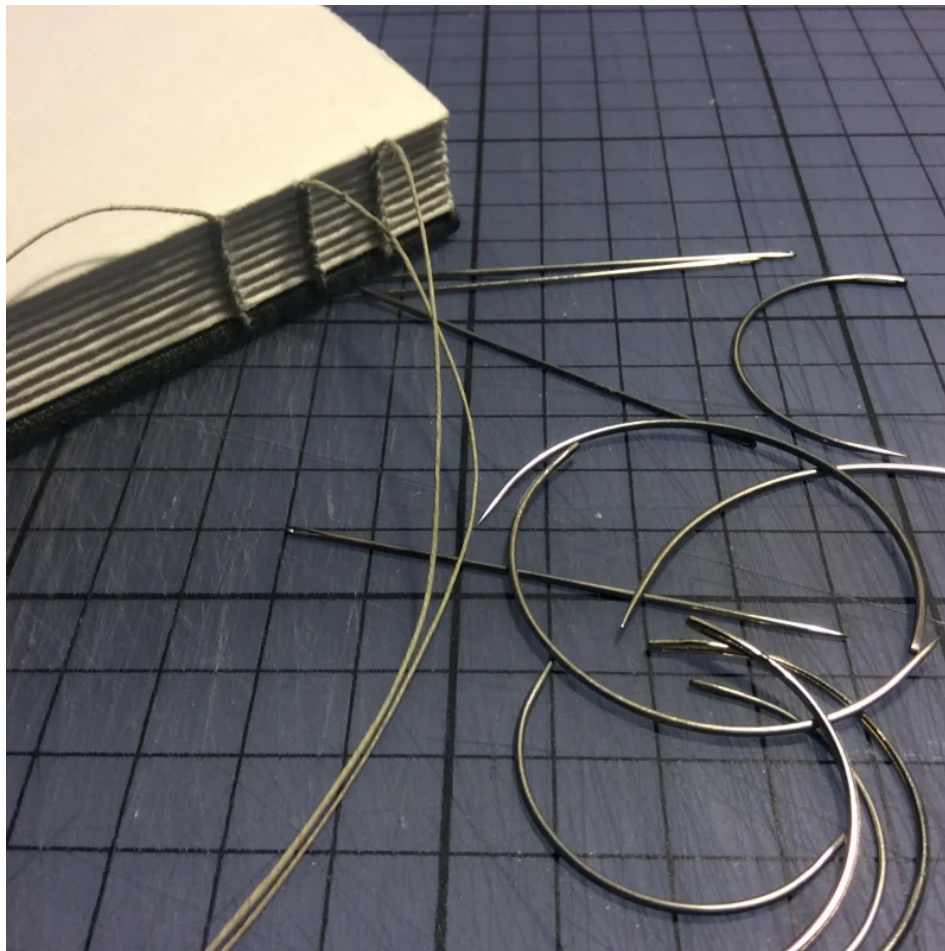




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I'm a big fan of multi-needle Coptic binding, but you can apply all my tips to the single-needle binding just as well. This book has ten sewing stations, which means I'm working with ten needles. I can handle ten threads and ten needles, but when I add headphones to the mix (I often listen to podcasts while working) the trouble begins...

Structurally I find more sewing stations = better book. Unless you go really extreme, that is. Sadly, with multi-needle Coptic binding doubling the number of sewing stations also means the time spent on sewing doubles. Still, I think stability is crucial, and I'm happy to spend that extra time to create a more durable book. I'd only use two sewing stations if the book is max 3 inches tall. Any non-miniature book should have at least four sewing stations, but more=better, obviously keeping in mind the size of the book.



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As a side note I want to mention that the terminology of bookbinding seems to vary a lot from source to source. I (and most others) refer to this type of binding as the Coptic binding, while some think it's an Ethiopian binding – the difference between the two being either the style and/or lack of endbands and/or the style in which the covers are attached. I haven't found a reliable definition that would make the difference clear. So, for now I'm still sticking with the term Coptic. If you have special knowledge about this terminology, I'd love to hear more about it!

PS. This tall but skinny book has plenty of pages made from thick drawing paper, and it's available for sale [in my shop](#).

In all books, bookbinding, coptic, my tutorials

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Adriana 9 years ago · 0 Likes

Hi. It's possible to make these digonal holes withouth a dremel? Thanks for the tips! Wonderful work.

Kaija 9 years ago · 0 Likes

Absolutely, Adriana! As you can see in the video, I use a slim awl to make the diagonal holes. You can also use a needle stuck on a cork if you haven't got a suitable awl. I use the Dremel for making the holes that go straight through the cover boards, but that's because my wrists hurt if I make too many holes with an awl. Before I got the drill I used a regular awl to punch all the holes, and just tidied up the resulting bump on the reverse with a knife – more about that in [another bookbinding tip post I wrote](#).

Susan Chute 8 years ago · 0 Likes

Why wouldn't sewing in such a fashion compromise the book board on the diagonal above where the needle enters the coverboard? As I see it, the only thing preventing the book board from fraying is the pasted down cover material. (I'm a beginning bookbinder, but I'm also a librarian.)

Kaija 8 years ago · 0 Likes

Ooh, I love questions like this! You're absolutely right about that spot being the weakest point, but when the alternative is to have the thread go around the board edge (like in most contemporary Coptic bindings you see online), this is still a much better choice. Since the binding opens so well and doesn't require manhandling while writing, we can pretty safely assume the book goes through the most abuse while it's closed, perhaps tossed in your bag, and while the book stays closed there isn't any movement that would push the cover boards outwards, away from the stitching, straining that diagonal sliver of the book board. But if the thread goes over the board edge, it's extremely likely the thread frays and breaks as it's in no way protected from the friction that the outer edges of a spine are bound to endure. If I know a book has to go through some crazy ordeal in its lifetime, then I'd definitely choose some other type of binding altogether, but for a Coptic binding this is still the smartest way to go about attaching the covers. I hope this explanation is helpful!

Susan Chute 8 years ago · 0 Likes

Yes, Kaija, thanks so much for the explanation. I'll try it!

Mariana 8 years ago · 0 Likes

Hi, where did you get your slim awl from? I can't seem to find it anywhere

Kaija 8 years ago · 0 Likes

I bought it from a salesman visiting our bookbinding school over a decade ago, so I'm afraid I'm unable to point you in the right direction when it comes to finding an awl just like mine (it's a multi-tool with a knife as well). But I did find that googling "light duty paper awl" led me to a few places that sell these slimmer awls. They may not be as good as mine for this job, as the short and steady needle part makes the job a lot easier, but the longer ones should do the trick nonetheless.

Elizabeth 8 years ago · 0 Likes

I really want to try this type of binding. I love it. I have 2 questions for you. What size needle do you use for sewing through the covers? Is it necessary to go through the cover twice? ok a couple more questions Do you use wax linen thread and if so what size. I think maybe if I had the book I was working on in front of me it might be clearer in my head but I haven't started it yet, just reading this article. I think I have the book you mention so I will need to go and find it. Thanks so much for this as I have been wanted to bind this way for awhile.

Kaija 8 years ago · 0 Likes

Hi Elizabeth, Thanks for your comment and sorry for my delayed reply! I'm taking a hiatus from bookbinding in order to focus on writing this summer and things have been a bit hectic at times. I try to respond to these types of questions during my office hours sessions, but given that I won't get round to having one this month I'll do my best to give your questions a brief reply here.

My bookbinding needles are #18, but anything not massively thick basically works. I buy my linen thread unwaxed and wax it myself as I personally find the ready-waxed is too stiff and heavily waxed. I use different thicknesses of thread for different purposes – I recommend experimenting to see what works for you! Going through the covers more than once anchors the covers in place more securely – it lessens the stress on a single strand of thread, and even if one should wear and break, the other(s) still do a pretty good job keeping the cover from slipping off. I hope this info is helpful even though it took me a while to get to it!

Jane 8 years ago · 0 Likes

Hi, I am also a relatively new bookbinder and have a persistent question..I understand your method of the diagonal hole. Besides the strength and avoiding fraying of cord, it also has an elegant finished look. My question is this: With any coptic binding, my concern is always fraying around the holes on the face of the covers, where the threads enter. Particularly when using bookcloth or anything that is given to fraying. The hole is you covers look impeccably neat. Is there a way of making sure they don't fray?

Thank you! Jane

Kaija 8 years ago · 0 Likes

Hi Jane, Sorry it took me a while to get back to your question! Most of the time I use linen fabric instead of bookcloth, so it's easy for me to just stitch between the threads in the fabric and not break any fibres while doing so, but you could try a teeny tiny bit of glue where the hole is to keep the cloth from fraying.

Jane 8 years ago · 0 Likes

Hi Kaija, I use linen fabric, also, and that is a great idea to just stitch between the weave. I have the same issue using paper on the covers also, at times. Just one more questions: Do you glue down your inside cover paper After binding the text block to covers, or do you glue them down first? I rarely see photos of the inside covers of a coptic-bound book for some reason...

Thanks so much for responding. I hadn't yet found the answer to this, so I'm grateful for the help.

Kaija 8 years ago · 0 Likes

You're welcome! I finish the covers first and sew the book last. I think having the stitches be fully visible on the inside isn't an issue at all – I'd be more bothered by them being visible bumps on the paper that lines the inside covers.

Jane 8 years ago · 0 Likes

Kaija, Great, that's the way I do it also. Agreed about the bumps under the inside paper – also would not be very "giving" if they are glued down by the paper. Mysteries solved! Good luck with your writing. Best, Jane

8 years ago · 0 Likes

Hi, I'm kinda new in those things and I would like to ask one question if you don't mind. I love the idea of coptic binding but I would like to hide the stitches under another piece of textile (like thin eco leather), narrow, oblong piece that runs alongside the front and back stitches on the cover and the spine. I don't know if I made that clear enough :(

Kaija Rantakari 8 years ago · 0 Likes

Hi Julia,

There really isn't a special technique for that type of binding. I get what you're wanting to achieve, but unfortunately I don't have any more helpful advice than "just do it". Glue on a strip of leather after sewing the book and figure it out as you go! You can start with a strip that's too long and trim it to correct height at the head and tail of the spine and covers, or just trim the spine area and turn in the extra material around the board edges. Just a suggestion. These things you tend to learn as you go, so go and experiment, if you haven't already!

7 years ago · 0 Likes

Hi Kaija,

Thanks for this tutorial! I am not sure I fully understand how you get into the same hole when going back after a full circle in the cover. On the drawing, it looks like you get into the edge of the board, out on the front, make a stitch, go through the board, stitch, go on the front again, stitch, in, stitch – then what? This angle is weird... In the wood board, it would take two diagonal holes drilled, but what about Davey board?

Thanks!!!

Kaija Rantakari 7 years ago · 1 Like

Hi Anna,

Thanks for your comment! Yes, the angle is weird: the last two steps are to come out on the front and then to go through the same diagonal hole you began with. With thick wood covers you indeed could/should drill two holes, but with board having all those holes makes the board weaker, hence this little back and forth action with just one hole. I hope this helps!

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